

**Monstrosity and Social Violence: Challenges to Our  
Perception of Evil in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella  
Distante***

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This my last communiqué from the planet of the monsters.  
Never again will I immerse myself in literature's  
bottomless cesspools.\*  
Roberto Bolaño, *Distant Star*

In Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella Distante* (1996) (*Distant Star*), a group of Chilean university students is infiltrated by a murderer shortly before Pinochet's coup. The murderer is also a poet (or at least he pretends to be so), who goes by the name of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. Following the September 1973 putsch by Pinochet, there were disappearances, mostly of leftist students, as well as many poets. Among the victims in *Distant Star*: the Garmendia twins, two young women who were seduced by the murderer, who becomes famous right after the putsch under the name Carlos Wieder. The poet/murderer is almost perfect in his evilness and seems unassailable. He invents new forms of poetry, writing in

delusional Latin lines. He also organizes events with photographs of actual executions for the benefit of a distracted bourgeoisie and with the approval of the dreaded DINA (the intelligence office and secret police in Pinochet's regime). Are we talking here about a monster, in a canonical sense of the term? Is Roberto Bolaño resorting to the old temptation of demonizing the assassins and political criminals by bestowing all archetypal characteristics of evil on a single character?

Bolaño seems to discuss the conditions under which the image of a monster is built (mainly through the reconstruction of memories), and to attribute to him the status of evil incarnate. My aim in this essay is to show how through a double process of *derealization* and *distancing effect*, Bolaño challenges the reader to appreciate the image of monstrosity as a result of certain historical conditions and mechanisms of political power: that Bolaño seems aware of the cultural historical burden of the concepts of evil and monstrosity—at least in literary terms—and that he deliberately plays with them in order to undermine the foundations on which our perception of monstrosity is based.

### **From the Planet of the Monsters**

In “Monster Theory (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen engages in a cultural discussion of monstrous creations within the social contexts in which they appear. That discussion starts with the understanding of the monster as a social sign. The monster is an allegory of a social structure, and an allegory of a sociopolitical time. In Cohen's words: “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (199–200). Cohen proposes a way of seeing the monster as a social and cultural metaphor, a way for understanding the monster as a unique prism through which one could also understand the formation of social and cultural structures. The monster thus becomes a mirror along social, political, and cultural levels.

These statements have particular resonance when literary monstrosity is placed in open dialogue with historical and social monstrosity taking place in the time of a dictatorship in a South American country. This dual implication of monstrosity and sociohistorical experience are extremely useful to understand where, in the broad spectrum of discussion on monstrosity, we can locate Bolaño's literary exercise in *Distant Star*.

On the issue of monstrosity, my first impression is that the novel deals with a monstrosity that tries to “cross the mirror” of monstrosity. Bolaño proposes an exercise of literary “monsterization” of real events—

—which even in everyday language and in official historical memory we tend to describe as “monstrous”—and simultaneously discusses the territoriality of the monster on both the literary and social spectrum. In this sense, Bolaño is responding in a highly creative way to one of the central questions about monstrosity: why is a monster created? In other words, he is trying to explain why dissimilar cultures, in different historical circumstances, have always created monstrous explanations for events in which human communities are involved. Cohen concludes that monsters “ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them” (498–99).

In *Distant Star*, Bolaño seems to have decided to scrutinize this radical question from an aesthetic perspective. As I will detail below, the story takes us on a monster hunt to catch Carlos Wieder, the evil poet. But at some point this original process is displaced in order to ascertain a sort of universal monstrosity beyond just the personal cases. In the process of responding to the purpose of why a monster was created, Bolaño ends up in a game of multiple mirrors and successive rematches, e.g., the act of political revenge which ultimately leads to the capture of Wieder. This revenge leads the narrator to conclude in a famous line that we are not really living the exception but the rule; that this is not a planet inhabited by some monsters, but that it is “the planet of the monsters.” Thus, although monstrosities appear embodied in certain people on a regular basis, and in particular conflicts, it is more important to recognize that such monstrosity is a specific sign of our human experience. Even through a relentless and rational search, as ruthless and rational as a literary critic can be, the narrator Arturo Belano is not able to destroy monstrosity. He is able to catch a monster, or an imitation of a monster, but monstrosity finally seems to have vanished when the social context has changed.

From the beginning of *Distant Star*, Wieder is described as being unique, extraordinary, or different.<sup>1</sup> At first, this brings us to the central question of how the monster is constructed in every culture. As Cohen asserts, “Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual” (249–50). Although the structure of the novel provides us with a sort of “multilayered memory” exercise (in which Arturo Belano, the narrator, uses the memory of Bibiano O’Ryan and other witnesses, as well as comments and memories between them collected over many years through letters), the narrator presents an image of Wieder that seems unified. Yet, despite this attempt at unification, Wieder’s characterization remains multifaceted, ambiguous, even legendary. In a particularly open reference, Belano writes: “What did Ruiz-Tagle say? It

might be important, if only I could remember” (9). This strategy to recover the memory of the facts is clearly flawed, and the author wants to alert readers to its limitations. He shows how the exercise of his own memory is supplemented by ideas, desires, and frustrations.

Thus, filtered by imperfect memories, we know that Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder was distinguished (“he talked as if he were living inside a cloud”; 4), self-educated, with a high sense of fashion, and definitely rich. Wieder, the monster, stands out from the typical students at the University of Concepción. “Ruiz-Tagle was never short of money.” “He once said that his father or his grandfather used to have an estate near Puerto Montt” (4). All of these kinds of distinctions, in the context of the Chile of the 1970s, had a clear social and cultural implication, and one of the consequences of that social differentiation was ideological:

The differences between Ruiz-Tagle and the rest of us were obvious. We spoke a sort of slang or jargon derived in equal parts from Marx and Mandrake the Magician (we were mostly members or sympathizers of the MIR or Trotskyite parties, although a few of us belonged to the Young Socialists or the Communist Party or one of the leftist Catholic parties), while Ruiz-Tagle spoke Spanish, the Spanish of certain parts of Chile . . . where time seems to have come to a standstill. (6)

The culmination of this description of Wieder’s otherness is physical and potentially sexual. We can see in this case precisely the idea of a monster that simultaneously fascinates and frightens, but who is always seen as superior. While it is true that the presentation of Wieder’s monstrosity strikes an ironic tone, it nevertheless operates with a sense of fascination: “He was tall and slim, but well built and handsome. According to Bibiano O’Ryan, his face was too inexpressive to be handsome, but of course he said this with the benefit of hindsight, so it hardly counts” (5).

As Cohen reminds us, there is “a cultural fascination with monsters—a fixation that is born of the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens” (67–68). This fascination can be seen in the way that Bolaño presents Wieder, but it is also apparent in the accuracy with which the models correspond to the “natural” evil character. In this sense, we can say that Bolaño is once again playing with the conventions of literary discourse to set the stage for his project, which is to derealize and distance the reader from standard monster hunt fictions in order to propose a sociopolitical discussion.

In *Distant Star*, the narrator decides to elaborate on the “evidence” gathered through the memories of witnesses projected over the past,

showing the monstrous difference of Wieder: “Sometimes he would turn up in a suit and tie; other days he’d be wearing sports gear, and he wasn’t” (4). But the highest point of this fascination/fear has clearly a sexual component. Wieder has captivated the Garmendia sisters, who are participants in the poetry workshops in which the witnesses (Bibiano and Belano) are also participating. Wieder has garnered the interest of the most beautiful women in their natural space. Others poets such as Bibiano and Belano are not only poorer and less educated than Wieder; they are also less handsome and sexually attractive: “Veronica was in love with Ruiz-Tagle. And it’s possible that Angelica was in love with him too” (10). Those seductive powers seem to have worked even in a tragicomic vein on Fat Marta—whom the narrator strives to describe as a overweight and homely. Asked about the keys that would lead to suspect Wieder, Fat Marta also speaks in a tone of fascination: “Alberto [Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder], she said, is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry” (14). The conviction of Fat Marta also involves an element of fear (“And you know why I’m so sure? Because of his will . . . He has a will of iron. You don’t know him”; 15), something that exceeds fascination to become perfectly aligned with the construction of Wieder as a legendary figure.

Here we see how the mechanism of image construction works, how deeply “we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair” (Cohen 428–29). Wieder is always seen through memories, through explanations after the fact, but always as an incarnation of evil. Indeed we do not even know if at the time of the actual situation, the witnesses thought the same way they do now. There is kind of a mist created through the memory of the events. This mist engenders the monster: his image is made of imaginary figurations, which together with the reality of a *fait accompli*, contribute to the seamless construction of an evil character:

Bibiano said he felt like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*, when she goes into the neighbor’s house for the first time with John Cassavetes. What was missing from Ruiz-Tagle’s flat was something unnameable (*or something that Bibiano, years later, and knowing the full story, or a good part of it at any rate, considered unnamable, but palpably present*), as if the host had amputated parts of the interior. (7; my emphasis)

Then, toward the end of the story of “the facts” (chapter one), when Belano has already acknowledged that he did not know the details of the murder of the Garmendia sisters, the legendary figure also breaks through. Paradoxically, the monster in this story cannot be caught, but it is totally possible to verify its actions through the imagination.

Moreover, the process of remembering involves one substantial irony: the monster is seen as such only on the basis of the charges attributed to him, charges that are never confirmed by facts. He is technically just a suspect, but the description insists on his monstrosity. Belano seals the story of the murder with a certification that Wieder is merely an assassin who left some uncovered clues. The conclusion for Belano is that while Wieder seemed to be a god, in fact he was nothing of the sort:

And the bodies will never be found; but no, one body, just one, will appear years later in a mass grave, the body of Angelica Garmendia, my adorable, my incomparable Angelica, but only hers, *as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god.* (23; my emphasis)

I would like to come back to the idea that this kind of construction of the monstrous image of Wieder appears clearly in the first third of the work, but in the resolution of the novel, there is uncertainty with this illusory first idea. Bolaño wants to build the image of the monster with the highest fidelity possible in order to make the derealization that he proposes at the end more effective, thus opening to question the sociopolitical nature of monstrosity. Thus, the monster created by Bolaño only seems to serve the narrator's own efforts to set aside the person characterized by evil monstrosity in order to refocus on the real historical situation.

### **Monster Hunt and Derealization in *Distant Star***

*Distant Star* has been linked to the resurgence of crime and horror fiction in Latin America. According to several scholars (Manzoni 2002; Espinosa 2003; Paz Soldán and Faverón 2008) it is even possible to cite numerous examples of this tradition in Latin American literary fiction (significantly Quiroga, Borges, and Cortázar). However, it seems necessary to rethink the literary categories that are often used to critique Latin American horror literature in its dialogue with regions outside the Euro-American traditions. For instance, while mostly referring to the detective novel, Franklin Rodríguez (2006) points out the state of the Latin American novel as a search for new elements of relation to reality:

In the Latin American literary context, the notion of the neopolicial underlines the detective's task in relation to sociopolitical and communitarian concerns, while antidetective narratives focus on

persistent questioning of the detective's task in a postmodern context. (4)

Rodríguez's take on this type of Latin American fiction opens a window for the incorporation of contradictory components. In that sense, talking about these fictions in the Latin American literary context forces readers to recast two elements. The first relates to content, because these fictions *fail* in alienating themselves from a complex sociopolitical reality. *Distant Star*, for instance, combines the pursuit of a serial murderer in relation to acts anchored in the collective historical memories of the Chile of the 1970s, specifically the issue of the disappeared under the Pinochet regime. This reference immediately puts forth the sociopolitical and ideological discussions about the issue, especially for Latin American audiences.

A second element is the sociopolitical function of writing itself, a discussion about the literature as a social intervention in the public debate. In trying to create situations to clarify enforcement of judicial procedures—in this case, a set of processes well known in human rights abuses, political persecution, and abuses of state power—the role of writing begins to exceed the boundaries of pure entertainment (suspense, detective, or horror fiction in their narrow senses) to enter directly into the universe of public discussion about memory in Chile. In connection to this political intervention of writing, the discussion proposed and the political events that occur affect citizens and mark their everyday lives. That way, even fiction occupies a space in shaping the cultural imagination of the community, and usually contributes either to opening or reopening a discussion regarding the issues that have arisen in a social and historical process.

Interestingly, in *Distant Star* this political intervention through writing nourished by memories is done through subaltern perspectives. It is necessary to remember that the inquiries undertaken for more than twenty years by Belano (in Barcelona) and Bibiano (in Chile) as well as Romero's performance as detective, contribute fictionally to further examination of the Chilean dictatorship (1973–1989) in its historical perspective, this time through the eyes of minor participants in the tragedy. From my perspective, incorporating these nuances—not heroic characters, not big victims—gives *Distant Star* this air of plausibility and highlights the actual complexity of the historical fact:

People in Chile are dying to hear stuff like that . . . I thought of Bibiano O'Ryan, who had stayed in Chile and followed Wieder's tracks. I saw him working in the shoe shop . . . and then I saw him publishing successful books . . . and spending semesters as a visiting professor at North American universities, whimsically

deciding to lecture on the new Chilean poetry or contemporary Chilean poetry . . . and mentioning me . . . an odd sort of poet, working, last I heard, in a factory somewhere in Europe. (139)

Moreover, the novel moves beyond mere illustration: it places fiction as a social institution at the head of a historical inquiry, even if this inquiry is mostly of a symbolic nature. The typical social, political, and judicial descriptions of the Chilean dictatorship and the transitional process are replaced in *Distant Star* by conversations about *mere* aesthetics and poetry, which are still powerfully engaged with reality. That happens because the discussions regarding poetry continue being an inquiry on evil, that is, the horror of Pinochet's dictatorship and the monstrosity of the political events that poets had experienced. Thus, both the initial inquiry to determine the true identity of the poet-monster Wieder, and the subsequent one to reveal the fate of the victims, become literary exercises in which acting as a detective implies acting as a literary critic and vice versa. It is a detective search for symbols, because symbols are also a way to recognize the face of evil. But here its recognition, the recognition of this evil's face, which normally can be the culminating moment of a monster hunt or the immediate prelude to its destruction, inexplicably becomes a tragicomic succession of images with no importance, fragments of non-related conversations. At the beginning, it appears like a sort of parody of the typical fiction of a chase, occurring through a shift in the levels of the plot, as well as through characters and in the resolution itself. Focusing on the Latin American corpus, Rodríguez has already noted the relevance of considering ideas regarding parody (originally formulated by Hutcheon), in contrast to other ideologically-charged definitions of parody. According to Rodríguez, Hutcheon's definition provides a conceptualization of parody that allows for a nonrestrictive study of the multiple possibilities derived from (post) modern parodic texts.

Seeing parody this way helps us to better understand the paths taken by the chase of evil in *Distant Star*. The novel opens with an atmosphere of shock: to the end of chapter one, the fearful depiction of evil characters and their intervention in murdering the young poets leave no doubt that we are dealing with *horror novel* material. Yet, contrary to this, the information offered by Bibiano, by the narrator Belano, and by the investigator Romero, indicate that the atmosphere of the novel is invaded by a kind of shadow of disbelief. The story has been told in so many ways by the narrator that it becomes clear that he is reconstructing memories from long ago and that he is adding speculation and imaginary plots. They looked for the murderer Ruiz-Tagle, also known as Wieder, the monstrous poet they knew at the time of Stein and Soto's poetry workshops at the University of Concepción, before the advent of



the dictatorship. Wieder is surely guilty of the death of two young members of these workshops, as well as of the disappearance of other people.

Because the structure of the novel involves narration from the present to remember the past (“From here on, my story is mainly conjecture”; 19), the image of time has two major facets. The first is the memory of the event, and the need to recall unproven data. The second is the imminent meeting of the monster, Wieder, who has been located along the coast of Spain. It is this second stage, with the concrete encounter in a café with the monster—prepared for by most of the narration in the novel—that it suddenly seems that the action, the characters, and even the plot are converted into an unrealistic situation.

I believe that the ultimate effect of reading of the work, in accordance with its sociopolitical context, is closer to a process I would refer to as *derealization* (inspired by the terminology of phenomenology). This work displays a derealization of its own literary and ideological agenda by illustrating the monstrosity of the events through a narrative that goes on to divest the work of a sense of reality. In literary terms, this is equivalent to denying the reality narrated in its own real nature. In terms of monster theory, the novel also challenges the assertion by Cohen that “representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic” (252–53).

It is this process of derealization<sup>2</sup> which explains better why the narration moves from the monster/evil hunting to the minimalism of actions, which are disconnected and non-transcendental. Finding Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder by making him huntable, easily caught after the decision of someone to pay for it in Chile, derealizes the initial idea of an evil monster who was in Pinochet’s Chile simply intangible, uncatchable. The monster here vanishes in front of Belano and Romero—and the reader as well. While likely caught and murdered as the result of a vendetta, the absurd narration does not discuss political motives for such a development.

The monster’s capture begins with the recognition of him as a common man trapped in an ordinary situation, eating a meal in a café: “He had aged. Like me, I suppose. But no, much more than me. He was fatter, more wrinkled; he looked at least ten years older than I did” (144). Thus, the narration also manages to derealize the notion of monstrosity that had built up in the novel. In this sense, the narrative displays a series of layers through which to observe such derealization. Especially important is the role played by empathy. Here I define *empathy* as the capacity to recognize emotions that are being experienced by other human beings, a capacity that is at odds with the description of a monster. A monster is by definition not empathetic, for

empathy brings us closer to others, while monstrosity creates distance. The process suggested by Bolaño's narrative is like a camera zoom that allows us to acknowledge other facets of the monster or even his non-monstrous side. The central tool of this approach is empathy.

It is a paradox that the way to uncover this monster is through the recognition of more human characteristics such as voice, sight, and gestures. One could say that Wieder's monstrosity disappears with the disappearance of the monstrous conditions in which he worked perfectly as an evil incarnation. This way, the monster in *Distant Star* works as a monster in the Chile of the dictatorship, but suddenly loses his monstrosity while sitting in a café in Barcelona.

It struck me that he had a hard look peculiar to certain Latin Americans over the age of forty, quite different from the hardness you see in Europeans or North Americans. A sad, irreparable sort of hardness. (145)

Cohen indicates clearly that “representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic” (252–53). If one accepts this observation, one would have to conclude that *Distant Star* questions the typical monster-hunting epic in which the grandeur of the hero is directly proportional to the horror of the monster. Yet we know that the structure of this particular narration fails, and that it fails on purpose: the evil is found, but it does not matter any longer. The investigator and the poet are depicted as antiheroes, while the narrator confesses not knowing details and stresses the role of imagination in the completion of stories. Even the evil/monster itself appears as an ordinary man, like a post-show actor in a dressing room, someone who had played a part in a horror performance. An air of confusion and disbelief reigns at the end of the novel. Even when the crucial moment appears and the final revenge is going to take place, Bolaño and the readers have to use their imagination to complete the plot.

As discussed before, monster hunting in *Distant Star* also serves to create an atmosphere that is mostly historical: the acute crisis and complex sociohistorical facts following Chilean political history in recent decades. In that sense, the novel seems deployed in two major areas: the first is the story of a search of the monstrous murderer; the second deals with the exercise of the historical memory of the putsch that brought Pinochet to power in Chile, including the death of Salvador Allende, the constitutional president.

The historical background is reconstructed by micro-stories, through minor characters fully involved in a unique and horrifying moment of the history that changed their lives forever. These witnesses

suddenly play a major role in the monster hunt, either recognizing Wieder's writing or recognizing Wieder's face.

Is it him? asked Romero. Yes, I said. Are you certain? I'm certain. I was going to say something more, launch into ethical and aesthetic reflections on the passing of time . . . *but Romero quickened his pace. He has a job to do, I thought. We have a job to do, I realized, horrified.* (146; my emphasis)

Is the role played by the narrator Belano one of hero or villain? Is he also becoming a sort of monster or an ally of monsters? Does monstrosity belong only to "evil"? Does it make any moral sense to take justice into one's own hands, as the investigator Romero does? These questions seem to encourage a reflection on the horror that Belano starts while realizing the role he is playing in his own plot: "For a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin, looking over his shoulder at the book he had opened" (144). Thus, towards the end of the novel we are seeing a derealization of any kind of monster hunt and consequently, on a sociohistorical level, any search for historical justice. We only begin to perceive, thanks to the sincerity of the narrator, that his views about the death of the murderer are not so clear, and that they do not form part of any effective justice. The narrator is not convinced of the usefulness of any form of revenge, even though he clearly acknowledges the monstrosity of the facts along the narration.

This specific topic clearly recalls one of Cohen's theses that refers to the search and battle against monsters:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (344–45)

In the context of the Chilean transition that began in 1989 (the novel was written in 1996) the role of judging the perpetrators of killings and disappearances was also tinged with long discussions and confrontations.<sup>3</sup> *Distant Star* appears as an exercise in collective memory that passes through the deconstruction of the image of evil, incarnated in the monster, and opens a discussion perhaps less passionate, but also pessimistic, about the limitations and risks of pure revenge. If revenge works this way, then Wieder's monstrosity was not the exception; we all live in a world of monsters.

From this point of view it is possible to better understand the sort of pious, cold description that Belano gives of the murderer: “He didn’t look like a poet. He didn’t look as if he had been an officer in the Chilean Air Force. He didn’t look like an infamous killer” (145). This derealization of the monster hunting tactics seems to be much more than a rhetorical strategy. It is an ethical declaration, or at least an assertion of the impossibility of supporting any simple ethical discourse when faced with the horror stories that really happened. For when the story is over, we discover that the derealization of the monster-hunting fiction was not a hoax, a literary trap, but a real detachment from historical facts; it was no literary game to secure the return of the evil monster or his resuscitation. Belano does not seek to give a last gasp, or a shock ending. To the very end of *Distant Star*, the narrator has abandoned the ritual of the storyteller, has eluded a moral ending, and has forgotten to reassure the reader of the prevalence of the good or the primacy of reason over fear. The narrator starts by presenting just cold images, devoid of passion. So, when the character of Wieder disappears before our eyes, and nothing seems to restore any sense of peace, neither in Belano nor in his memories, there is nothing that gives us hope in a future salvation: “Then I lit a cigarette and began to think about trivial matters. Like time. The greenhouse effect. The increasingly distant stars” (147).

### **Aesthetics of Evil**

Bolaño’s poetics has also been quickly assimilated to the trends of formal experimentation in fiction around the issue of violence and evil. It is interesting to note that one of the key issues in *Distant Star* is precisely its historical context. Depiction of horror and evil in this fiction is absolutely tied to the horror and the evil of actual events. Undoubtedly, Bolaño presents a strong image of the traumatic effects of the start of Pinochet’s dictatorship. Nonetheless, his approach to the historical horror operates on a more subtle level. The central plot in this fiction is not full of political characters or situations. *Distant Star* is a novel narrated through subaltern circumstances, such as those of a circle of poets in a provincial university in Chile sharing their fragmented memories and stories. Minor characters are not heroes, but ordinary people battling for survival in a horrible new political situation (“it looks like we’re hosting the world championship in ugliness and brutality”; 17). It is a situation they do not fully comprehend.

Thus, the characters behave as actors constantly moving within a phantasmal stage, clueless to their own situation. They visit each other,

chat inconsistently, cook and talk about poetry and other interests. The atmosphere installed by the dictatorship becomes a sort of new natural order. This way the evil image, or rather the set of acts that characters interpret as an evil image, appear as incontestable, necessary, and natural explanations of historical events. Evil is thus the explanation inculcated in the minds of those being affected, as a provisional response to the horror experienced.

Daniuska González concludes that this concept of evil can be found in many of the writings of Bolaño, namely in the characters and situations of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, *Distant Star*, *Amulet*, and *Chile by Night*, where he expands a haze of ennui, of horror. While I agree with this approach to the horizons of evil in *Distant Star* and other fictions by Bolaño, it is necessary to point out that the presence of a construct that we can call “evil” in the structural assembly of this specific novel works simply as a temporary response of the characters to explain the horror. The presence of evil as a construct is thus a need for survival and, as such, a unique resource (albeit temporary) for understanding the historical facts of a violent putsch.

What characters try to do, then, is extend a memory of the events attributed to evil. It is this search for some explanation that encourages the narrator to reset the puzzle of his memory, and to cooperate in tracking the murderer. Thus, if the presence of evil is a constant in the novel (a permanent backdrop), this is not hidden by narrator Arturo Belano, who instead encourages the search for the murderer. Perhaps the most critical version of evil in *Distant Star* is given when Belano, as narrator and accomplice of the story, considers it necessary to raise the incommensurability of pain and injustice in order to make a clear impression of the real dimension of the horror machinery. By utilizing a twist in the story at the end, Belano raises a new set of existentialist questions regarding evil.

What I am saying is that Bolaño decides to give us a vision of evil to help us better understand the magnitude of the evil itself, trying to estrange it from the use of simple images of evil. This way, finding Wieder and killing him does not annihilate evil, or even stanch the wounds caused by it. The wonder of the appeal of the evil image as a categorical and supernatural entity is to capture precisely the image of Wieder, who thus becomes just a circumstance of evil. To elude the potential image of Wieder as evil incarnate, Bolaño decides to expose us to a sequence of events, characters, and morals, as mere impressions of the effects of evil. Even when at the end it seems that evil will be caught and justice restored, this narrator makes us complicit in his own process of alienation from the story already told. Belano recognizes no evil in Wieder, although he does recognize him as the murderer of the

Garmendia sisters, or as the poet of the dictatorship. This lack of a sense of Wieder as evil incarnate can be called a *distancing effect*.

Thus, Bolaño's version of evil allows readers to recap the story backwards to conclude, in a sort of Brechtian distancing effect,<sup>4</sup> that all facts narrated before were not really incontestable, natural, or necessary. Only in this way can the reader-spectator dissociate the images of Wieder and evil. Thus, again, the reader can understand the historicity behind *Distant Star* as a sequence of human circumstances, beyond notions of *evil* as a supreme cause.

Now, in this distancing effect from the personification of evil there is a second level that operates through the information that fiction itself provides about the character. Characterizing Wieder as a poet of evil, a sort of monster of writing, the novel prompts us to fully discuss the meanderings of an aesthetic of evil as a means of understanding the process proposed by the author's use of a distancing effect. Thus, the ethical discussion (mostly the central distinction between good and evil) is raised through an inquiry into the aesthetics of the evil poet.

To elucidate the role of the monstrous poet, we first have to remember that Wieder is a character whose monstrosity is just reconstructed from the testimonies of those who knew him in Chile before Pinochet's putsch. Also, let us remember that only a patient work of literary exegesis dedicated to the poet by narrator, Arturo Belano, makes it possible to trap him. Thus, Wieder is introduced as a conceptual artist, an odd artist using new formats for poetry, leaving messages in the sky, mostly lines that mix ideas on religious redemption with death threats. Probably the climax of all Wieder's aesthetic experience in Chile—and of our own perception of his ideas of aesthetic experience as readers—comes when he decides to present his own *happening*. This event is narrated through two voices, with the narrator's words recasting what an unrepentant General Muñoz Cano had written.

What happens then is a "creative" approach to the actual experience of the assassination of the Garmendia twins, and their subsequent use as part of an event of art. For this exposition, Wieder has allegedly used his own personal experience, that of the murderer, in order to create an aesthetic experience. The presentations cause the attendees to marvel:

The background hardly varied from one photo to another, so it seemed they had all been taken in the same place. The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. (88)

From this perspective, the first point I want to highlight is the inquiry about the materiality involving the artistic approach that Wieder is proposing to his audience, i.e, the mechanisms by which he is permitted to use a real experience as an artistic medium. Bolaño creates an improbable image of art, but one that is possible. Wieder may or may not be a poet (or an artist), and that, implicitly, does not matter. What matters most is the social function that this form of art fulfills, how those art forms are received.

If we understand the aesthetic experience as a relational experience that is part of a community of meaning, of a code that is shared, then the art circuit is completed perfectly. What Wieder offers is an aesthetic experience. And such an experience may include horror and disgust as acceptable ways to respond to the artistic object. Interestingly, the aesthetic experience itself is not the reason that attendees feel shocked in Wieder's exhibition; the pictures do not appear to have anything that can be interpreted as being particularly horrific. The effect of horror happens when attendees perceive pictures as being really possible, due to their own knowledge of the disappearances and tortures. In other words, the knowledge of the audience in the venue is certainly quite extensive in regard to disappearances; everyone knows what happened in those days. For readers, the same effect is operating: the display of the images horrifies them not because of the description in the text (Belano accepts that his memory is mediated by Muñoz Cano's narration of the facts at the venue), but because the reader knows that what happened with the disappeared in the novel is also the story of what happened with disappeared in Chile. Thus, Wieder is only using artistic conventions (pictures, happening) to bring to the mind of the attendees the tangibility of torture and assassination. This effect, completed by viewers, is the real source of their own horror: "Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women" (88).

To complete the hermeneutic circle in this aesthetics of evil, the presence of policemen from the infamous DINA is understood as an authentic exercise of criticism. This time, DINA officers arrive not to enforce the law, but to certify the correspondence between reality and representation, the consistency between the aesthetic experience and the reality captured. Through these layers of meaning (artistic venue, policy narration, memory narration, and fictional narrative) Bolaño turns a discussion of evil into a discussion of aesthetics. In the same way, the discussion on aesthetics in the novel is plainly converted into one of an ethical nature. The questions that arise thereafter are not limited to whether it was or was not right to treat horror material artistically. This kind of discussion can become easily unproductive. Regarding *Distant*

*Star*, it is more important to discuss who is authorized to present, exhibit, and be recognized as an artist, depending on the sociohistorical context. It is about who is authorized to be named an artist when DINA officers are in the middle of the *champ littéraire* (Bourdieu). The question of the morality of these actions leads to another: whether any form of art is morally acceptable, and if such acceptance is founded on the exercise of power. In *Distant Star*, intelligence officers from the fearsome DINA are, without doubt, a paroxystic image of the intervention of power in the field of art in modern society:

At first, their presence inspired respect and a certain fear . . . but as the minutes went by uneventfully, without a word from the agents, who were completely focused on their work, the survivors of the party began to ignore them, as if they were servants who had come to clean up ahead of time. (91)

Of course, the literary-critical discussion about social and ethical issues in this novel will appear again. If we yield to the dominant view, the artist as a medium between the real world and a parallel world, the work of art probably does not have any ethical issues. But in this novel one finds the reverse of this provocative assertion: to accept the idea of an immoral art—that is, to accept Wieder as an artist—spectators/readers need to question their own conceptions of the morality of the work of art, or, at least, abandon the image of art that they normally accept. A distancing effect is a preliminary condition for both of the mentioned responses: there is a distancing from the idea of art intrinsically related to morality, as well as a distancing from the idea of an art that is able to be perceived as alienating the work itself from sociohistorical facts. In *Distant Star* Bolaño decides not to take part in any of those choices—which is, admirably, another distancing effect for spectators/readers. Instead, he opts for summarizing the ethical and aesthetic challenges in which we, the readers, are engaged, through the words of Romero, the pragmatist:

I told him that in my opinion Carlos Wieder was a criminal, not a poet. All right, all right, let's not be intolerant, said Romero. Maybe in Wieder's opinion or anyone else's for that matter, you're not a poet, or you're a bad one, and he's the real thing. It all depends on the glass we see through. (117)

### **The Monster as a Political Enemy**



Anxiety over the sociopolitical usefulness of art as a weapon against the system was already present in the *Manifiesto Infrarrealista*, which Bolaño himself wrote in 1976 with a group of junior poets in Mexico. In one of its most memorable lines, the *Manifiesto* declares, “We dreamed of utopia and woke up screaming.” Allusion to the sociopolitical situation in Latin America is more than evident. For Latin American history the 1970s involves an awakening from a nightmare: dictatorships occur in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia, with the constant presence of U.S. power endorsing the exercise of institutionalized violence against the alleged greater enemy, communism. Thus, in 1976, Bolaño and his colleagues advocate for “A new lyricism that is beginning to develop in Latin America, and to sustain itself in ways that they do not cease to amaze us. The portal into this area is already the gateway into adventure: *the poem is like a journey and the poet like a hero who unveils heroes*” (*Manifiesto Infrarrealista*; my translation and emphasis).

At the same time, this search for a new aesthetics does not neglect historical and ideological concerns. Bolaño has felt firsthand the persecution and the barbarity of the Chilean dictatorship, the violent train of misery, which does not allow one to speak from an ivory tower. Thus, aesthetic inquiry will reshape the very foundations on which it operates, trading written works in order to insert itself in the marketplace. The claim of the new painting, new art, involves a different political commitment, a different commitment to reality. Arts have an ethic that is not born of ideological imposition, but of the conviction that the force of creation is itself above models of logic: “It is more revealing and plastic to stand in a park demolished by smog and see people cross the avenues in groups (which expand and contract), when both motorists and pedestrians are urgently seeking to reach their hovels; and it is the time when when the assassins go out and the victims follow them” (*Manifiesto*; my translation).

In this search for new ways to tackle the task of the new poet, Bolaño seems to have found a unique formula: he moves the poet out of the confines of literature, making him an actor in the discursive field. The poet’s image appears reflected in the narratives as a subject of investigation, as a source of problems. Poets in Bolaño’s fiction are also cops, savage detectives faced with the reality that they should no longer approach art as a weapon of attack, but as a measure of defense. Curiously, the exercise of this inquiry into evil is common to police officers and poets, and this in turn clearly explains the author’s choice of genre, such as thriller or detective novel. Thus, political concerns never disappeared from Bolaño’s work. On the contrary, his interest in discussing issues such as violence and evil in society is not divorced from his aesthetic interests, and both angles of his work often overlap.

This can also lead us to expect a sociohistorical approach to the idea of monstrosity in *Distant Star*.

In an article inspired by the work of Carl Schmitt, Jordi Claramonte proposes to read monstrosity from a political angle, understanding the monster as a figuration that could endanger characteristic relations of our internal cohesion. Claramonte proposes a reading of monster theory as one facet of a *theory of the general threat* to explain how it is constructed as an idea of political strategy. Based on the seminal writing of Schmitt, for whom politics was born of a central distinction between friend and enemy, it is possible to understand the monster as the enemy that threatens our identity, or at least our balance. I understand that this balance can be treated as multifaceted, from the individual to the collective. Indeed, Cohen, from another angle, has also referred to the intrinsic quality of the monster as an entity that divides and questions the certainties of a particular identity: “The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that ‘particular’ identity is an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abjection itself); as such it reveals their partiality, their contiguity” (481–84).

However, what makes it interesting to contrast Cohen’s ideas with Schmitt’s, is precisely the idea of how political monstrosity is conceived. According to Schmitt, “transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed” (36). Thus, the image of the enemy must be built as an image of evil, degraded into moral categories (good and evil), to thereby justify their disappearance. Obviously, Schmitt’s political theory has a resonant echo, creating a discussion framework for political action that leads to the justification of war.

In the context of our discussion of *Distant Star* it might be useful to revisit some elements that move the story in light of these recent approaches. Bolaño recreates a sociopolitical space of his country, which has generated violence and human rights violations through political actions. In my reading, it is the same political action that gives rise to the Pinochet government, which reorganizes society into friends and new enemies. The division of political action does not occur in an international context, as Schmitt describes, but involves a process of division in a population with a common identity. The issue can be taken further into several new directions. I will only recall that in the context of the Cold War many dictatorships appeared in South America, encouraged by the political action of the U.S. government against leftists or communists, presenting them as perfect illustrations of the

new scenario in which the distinction “friend-enemy” was degraded into a distinction between good and evil, which was accompanied by a mechanical war against the enemy. The Chilean experience of the 1970s is a perfect example of this.

In Bolaño’s novel, the differentiation built by the narrator is also a political one. But, interestingly, it is right after the Pinochet coup, when Wieder, the original monster, becomes a poetic star of the new regime, when the political differentiation of Chilean society into friends and enemies has become a clear division that turns monsters into political adversaries, in a form of new war that is invoked although never declared. In this way it can be understood that Wieder’s poetics are organized in terms of moral lessons (the transition from political into moral) and not solely into levels of aesthetics. All of those poems, written by Wieder in Latin, are actually of a religious nature, something that could be called, from a political perspective, a moralizing process of aesthetic and political ideas. Much of the “work” of the poet Wieder has this moralistic/religious approach and this leads us to conclude that the actual construction of the image of the monster had operated only when the new owners of power in Chile, with a clear fascist tendency, understood the enemies beyond the political sphere, as incarnations of evil. Monsterization of the Chilean society, i.e., its division into friends and enemies, and enemies who need to be destroyed because they are real evil, started with the political action of the interruption of the government of Salvador Allende. Thus, the monstrosity introduced by the coup, as a resource to justify the use of state violence against leftists and supporters of the previous political regime, has been the source of the true monsterization of Chilean society:

Silence is like leprosy, declared Wieder; silence is like communism; silence is like a blank screen that must be filled. If you fill it, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are pure, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are not afraid, nothing bad can happen to you. According to Bibiano, he was describing . . . the angel of our misfortune. (45)

In rhetorical terms a flashback has occurred that has aligned the reader’s ideological perception of reality with that of the narrator. What I am saying is that while at the beginning we understood that narrator Belano and the other witnesses were describing Wieder as a monstrous poet in an exercise of demonization, it was actually the monstrosity that led them to see it that way. Perception of the other as a monster to be destroyed was not their own creation. In other words, the narrator in *Distant Star* is not talking *about* monstrosity but narrating *from* monstrosity. His narration was born from a previously monsterized

society, in which internal division and loss of cohesion had already damaged the perception of reality. Those victims of the Pinochet regime were supposedly seeking retroactively a restoration of political order that they perceive to be lost. Even this quest is filtered through the new vision of politics (enemy as a monster) that was already installed in Chile. Here we understand why the narrator is ostensibly existentialist in his closing remarks, while doubting the effectiveness of both revenge and justice in contemporary Chile. Also, the “planet of the monsters” referenced becomes a realistic picture of the monstrosity that has been uncovered in Chilean society: that no revenge can restore a balanced state.

Interestingly, throughout chapter seven, Bolaño makes an ironic recount of an alleged human rights trial against Wieder, at which he is ultimately declared innocent (“The country had too many problems to concern itself for long with the fading figure of a serial killer who had disappeared years ago”; 111). The declaration is not surprising, according to the parodic narration that Bolaño uses: it could have been guessed seeing it retroactively from the time of colonization in Chile. At the trial, for instance, Amalia Maluenda (an indigenous woman and worker at the Garmendias’ house) cannot fully identify Wieder and she mixes depictions of the colonizers and perpetrators of atrocities in Chile’s history: “the story of the Chilean citizen Amalia Maluenda (is) partly the story of the Chilean nation. A story of terror” (111).

In the same trial, some military personnel defend Wieder’s sobering capacity: his ability to tell the truth to people who have no capacities to fully understand the message. What Bolaño suggests in *Distant Star* is finally a discussion of the idea of the monster in the light of a political vision projected over a real historical event. The entire program of the novel is unfolded first as a monster hunt, then as an examination of evil, and finally as a presentation within the political sphere. The recurrent idea that monstrosity is conniving with us, as a world, as part of human nature, makes readers dream of distant, new stars, of different places under another sun, far away from the horror. It would be a totally new world in which things like these do not happen. Meanwhile, in the real experience of political history we are *hic et nunc*; we can focus on discussing some of the insights that are masterfully suggested by the novel: the origins of evil, the process in which a monster is formed, and perhaps, at times, attempting to answer the complex question of *why*.

## Notes

- \* Unless otherwise indicated, citations from Bolaños' novel are from the English translation by Chris Andrews.
1. In fact, in chapter three, among the series of meanings related to the name “Wieder” in the original German language, the narrator notes: “Widernatürlichkeit, monstrosity, aberration.”
  2. Inspired by phenomenological critics such as Ingarden and Hartmann, *derealization* can be understood here as all kinds of literary components that contribute to make unreal what is supposedly real in the story. The effect of a literary reality that a work normally carries can also lead the reader to precisely the opposite effect, to the presentation of the unreality of the events described above.
  3. Yet by 2006, for example, the critic Carlos Almonte pondered *Distant Star* in these terms: “And justice is possible only halfway, in an act insane and treacherous by nature, which reveals the sick and perverse side, even those seemed to stay safe, afloat, clean” (my translation).
  4. As Marvin Carlson reminds us, “Brecht called for a drama whose elements were not blended but disjunctive, presenting reality as unpredictable and thus alterable” (pp). For a more detailed discussion, see Jameson, *Brecht and Method*.

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